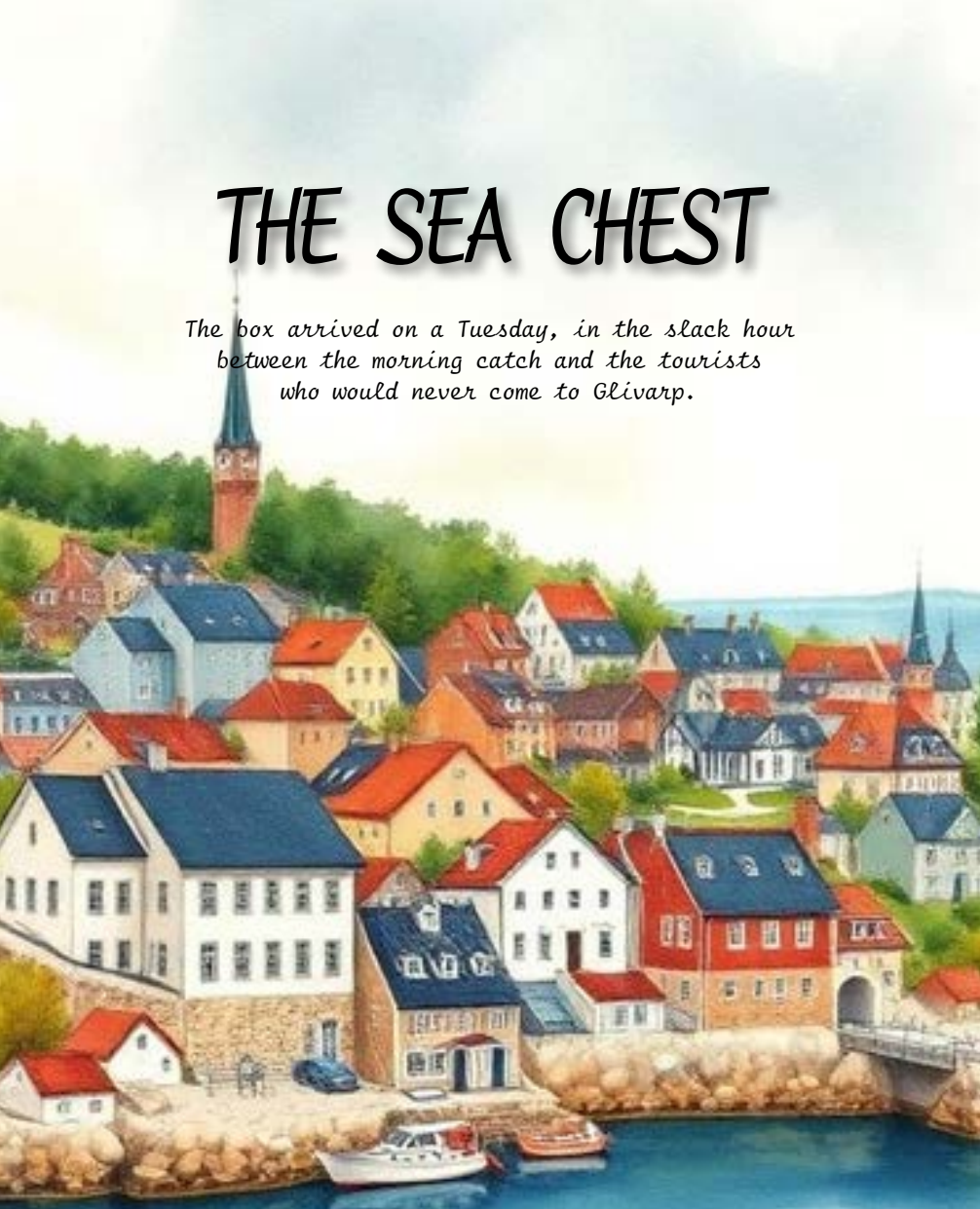
THE SEA CHEST

The box arrived on a Tuesday, in the slack hour between the morning catch and the tourists who would never come to Glivarp.



KRISTINA CLAESSON

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

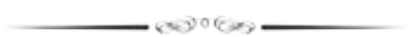
Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: submissions@ovimagazine.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

Kristina Claesson

The Sea Chest



An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

The box arrived on a Tuesday, in the slack hour between the morning catch and the tourists who would never come to Glivarp.

Elin Nyström was sweeping sand from her porch when the post boat puttered into the harbour, its engine coughing like an old man with a secret. She watched because that was what one did here, watched the water, watched the weather, watched for anything that might break the long rhythm of days that all ran together like the gray sea meeting the gray sky.

The postman, Lennart, struggled up the jetty with something awkward in his arms. Even from a distance, Elin could see it was old, the kind of old that made you want to touch it, the kind of old that had stories pressed into its wood like fingerprints.

“Elin!” Lennart called, though she was the only person within hearing distance. “Come see what the sea brought back.”

She leaned her broom against the house and walked down. The box was a sea chest; really, the sort a sailor might have carried two hundred years ago, brass corners gone green, the wood silvered by salt and time. It sat on the jetty planks like something that had always been there, only waiting to be noticed.

“No markings,” Lennart said. “Just your name, on a bit of paper tucked under the hasp.”

“My name?”

“Elin Nyström, Glivarp. No return. No postmark. It was just... there, they said, when they opened the mail shed this morning.”

She knelt on the jetty, the wood damp through her wool stockings, and ran her hand over the lid. The lock was rusted solid, but when she touched it, it gave way like a thing that had been waiting for permission. Inside, atop a folded oilskin, lay a photograph.

A woman. Young. Dark hair escaping from under a scarf, squinting into a sun that must have been bright, because her shadow lay sharp behind her

on what appeared to be these very rocks, this very harbour. Behind her, the old boathouse, the one that had burned in 1957, before Elin was born, before her mother was born.

On the back, in ink so faded it seemed almost a watermark: *Hilma, 1934. Tell her I came back after all.*

Elin's hand went to her throat, to the small silver locket she had worn since she was twelve years old, the locket that had belonged to her grandmother's sister, the one who went to America in 1935 and was never heard from again.

"Hilma," she whispered.

The sea slapped against the jetty pilings. A gull screamed. Lennart shifted his weight and said something about the weather turning.

But Elin was not listening. She was watching the path that led up from the harbour, the path along which a woman would have to come, if a woman were coming. And she was thinking about how, sometimes, the past is not past at all. Sometimes it is just waiting, like the tide, to come back in.

The arrival

May 2024

She came on the Wednesday afternoon bus, the one that only runs if at least three people are waiting at the Kristianstad station, and even then only as far as the main road, leaving passengers to walk the last two kilometers if they haven't arranged for someone to meet them.

No one had arranged to meet her.

I saw her from my kitchen window; I live in the yellow house with the peeling trim, the one that's been in my husband's family since before anyone thought to write such things down, and I thought, at first, that she must be lost. People get lost here. The roads curve in ways that seem intentional but are really just the result of old farms and older boundaries, and the

GPS always gives up somewhere between the turn for Karlsson's place and the stone wall that marks where the grazing land ends and the sea begins.

But she wasn't walking like someone lost. She walked like someone who knew exactly where she was going and had all the time in the world to get there. A suitcase on wheels behind her, good wheels, the kind that don't catch in the gravel and a canvas bag over her shoulder. Dark hair, cut short and practical. Jeans and a sweater too heavy for the afternoon but sensible for the evening, which would bring cold off the water. She was maybe forty, maybe older, it's hard to tell with women who haven't let children and worry carve their faces into familiar shapes.

She stopped at the gate to the old Pettersson place, the one that's been empty since Gerda died three winters back. And she stood there, looking at it, the way you look at a photograph of someone you used to know.

Well, I thought. Well, well, well.

By evening, everyone knew.

That's the thing about a village of two hundred people spread along seven kilometers of coast, news

travels not because people are gossips, though they are, but because there's a kind of responsibility in knowing. Someone new has arrived. Someone might need something. Someone might be connected to someone else, and if they are, you'd better know it before you meet them, so you don't put your foot in it.

"We should take her something," my husband Anders said, looking up from the fishing nets he was mending on the kitchen table, the twine making his thick fingers look almost delicate. "A pie. Some of that smoked fish."

"Let her settle first."

"Settle into an empty house with no food and no wood for the stove? It's May, Elin, but it's still cold at night."

He was right, of course. He usually was about practical things. That was why I'd married him, though at seventeen I couldn't have articulated it that way. He was solid. He knew which way the wind would blow by the look of the clouds, and he knew when to act and when to wait.

"Tomorrow," I said. "I'll go tomorrow."

But tomorrow came faster than either of us expected.

The scream woke me at half past two. A woman's scream, high and terrified, coming from the direction of the old Pettersson place. Anders was out of bed before I could move, pulling on his trousers, grabbing the flashlight that lived on his nightstand. I followed, heart hammering, feet finding my boots by memory.

We ran down the road, the gravel cold through my socks, I hadn't stopped to put them on properly and when we reached the gate, we saw her. The woman. Standing in the yard in her nightgown, barefoot, her face white as the moon that hung above us.

"There's someone in the house," she said, and her voice was steady, which was more terrifying than if she'd been hysterical. "In the bedroom. Standing in the corner."

Anders pushed past her; through the door she'd left hanging open. I heard his footsteps on the bare floors, then nothing, then his voice calling, "There's no one here."

"I saw her." The woman wrapped her arms around herself. "A woman in a gray dress. Old-fashioned. She was just... standing there. Watching me."

I looked at the house. At its dark windows, its sagging porch, its chimney that hadn't smoked since Gerda Pettersson drew her last breath. And I felt, for the first time in my life, that I did not want to go inside.

"Come with me," I said. "You'll stay at our house tonight. In the morning, we'll sort it out."

She looked at me then, really looked, and in the moonlight I saw something shift in her face. Recognition? No. Something else. Something that made the hair on my arms stand up.

"You're Elin Nyström," she said.

"I am."

"I'm Astrid. Astrid Pettersson. Gerda was my grandmother's cousin. I have something for you. Something I was supposed to deliver when I came."

"Something?"

But she just shook her head and followed me up the road, and behind us, the old house stood dark and silent, keeping its secrets for another day.

The photograph

May 2024

In the morning, over coffee and the cardamom buns I'd baked the day before, because in this village, you always bake extra, because you never know who might turn up, Astrid Pettersson told me a story.

It came out in pieces, the way stories do when the teller isn't sure yet what they mean. She was a historian, she said. A professor at Lund, though she looked too young for that, or maybe I just think of professors as old. She'd been working on a project about Swedish emigration to America, the ones who went in the 1930s, the ones who didn't come back.

"I found letters," she said, turning her cup in her hands. "In an archive in Minnesota. Letters from a woman named Hilma Nyström to her sister back here. They'd never been mailed—they were just... kept. Tied with ribbon in a box. The family who had them didn't know what they were. They gave them to me because I was asking questions, because I was from Sweden, because they thought I might know what to do."

I set down my coffee. My hand was not quite steady.

"The letters stop in 1941," Astrid continued. "The last one says she's coming home. That she's sorry for everything, that she's going to make it right. And then ...nothing. No record of her after that. No passage on any ship. No death certificate. Just... gone."

"Hilma was my grandmother's sister," I said. "She went to America in 1935. We never heard from her again. My grandmother waited her whole life. She used to say that Hilma would come back one day, that the sea wouldn't keep her forever."

Astrid reached into the canvas bag she'd brought from the house, the one I hadn't noticed her carrying when she fled in the night. She pulled out a photograph.

It was the same one. The woman on the rocks, the harbour behind her, the boathouse that burned. But it wasn't the same photograph; it was another copy, or maybe the original, because this one was sharper, clearer, the woman's face unmistakable.

"Hilma," I whispered.

"She came back," Astrid said. "That's what I found in the archives. She came back in 1941. But she didn't stay. And no one ever recorded it. No one ever knew, except whoever met her at the harbour that day, and whoever took her picture."

"How do you know?"

"Because of this." She pulled out another photograph. This one was darker, taken inside somewhere, a corner of a room visible, a stove, a window, a curtain with a familiar pattern. And in the corner, a woman in a gray dress, her face turned slightly away, as if she hadn't meant to be photographed at all.

"That's the same dress," I said. "In both photographs. The same woman."

"The dress is the same. The woman..." Astrid hesitated. "The woman in the second photograph is

not Hilma. It's Gerda. Gerda Pettersson, in 1950, in this very house. Wearing her mother's dress."

I stared at the photograph. At the woman in the corner. At the dress that had belonged to Hilma—my grandmother's sister, the one who went away and never came back.

"Gerda never wore that dress," I said. "I knew Gerda. She was my mother's age. She wore trousers and wool sweaters and those terrible knitted hats she made herself. She wouldn't have worn a dress like that. It was too old-fashioned, too..."

"Too much like her mother's dress," Astrid finished. "Exactly. So why did she put it on, just once, to have her photograph taken? And why does the photograph exist at all?"

We sat with that question while the morning sun climbed over the water and the gulls began their endless arguing on the rocks. I thought about Gerda Pettersson, who had lived alone in that house for forty years, who had come to every village gathering but never spoken more than a few words, who had always seemed to be watching something the rest of us couldn't see.

"Last night," I said carefully, "you said you saw someone. In the bedroom. A woman in a gray dress."

"Yes."

"You think it was..."

"I think," Astrid said, "that when I opened that sea chest in the mail shed, the one addressed to you, the one that appeared from nowhere, I let something out. Or let something in. I don't know which. But I know that Hilma Nyström came back to Glivarp in 1941, and something happened to her here. Something that kept her from going home to her sister. Something that's been waiting ever since."

The sea chest. I'd forgotten about it in the night's chaos. "Where is it now?"

"At the house. I brought it with me... it was too heavy to carry, so I left it in the kitchen. That's where I was sleeping, on a mattress by the stove. I hadn't gone into the bedroom. I hadn't even opened the bedroom door."

"But she was there anyway."

"She was there anyway."

I stood up. The decision came to me whole, like a rock rising out of the sand at low tide. "We're going back. Today. Together. And we're going to open that bedroom door and see what's there."

"Elin..."

"My grandmother waited her whole life. My mother waited. I'm not waiting anymore. Whatever happened to Hilma Nyström, I want to know. Even if..." I stopped, not sure how to finish.

"Even if it's something you'd rather keep buried?"

I looked at Astrid Pettersson, this woman who had arrived in our village like a letter from the past, and I saw in her face the same thing she must have seen in mine: the knowledge that some secrets are heavier than stones, and that carrying them alone is its own kind of burial.

"Yes," I said. "Even then."

The bedroom door

The old Pettersson house looked different in daylight. Less menacing, more sad, the way empty houses always look, like old people waiting for visitors who never come. Astrid had left the door unlocked when she fled, and it swung open at my touch with a groan that seemed almost human.

The kitchen was exactly as she'd described it, a mattress by the stove, a suitcase open on the floor, and in the corner, the sea chest. My sea chest, though I'd never seen it before. The one addressed to me.

I knelt beside it. The lid was open, Astrid must have left it that way and inside, beneath the folded oilskin, I could see papers, photographs, a small leather journal. The detritus of a life. Hilma's life.

"The bedroom," I said. "Show me."

Astrid led me through a narrow hallway, past a bathroom with fixtures from the 1950s, past a closet stuffed with coats that smelled of mothballs and time. At the end, a door painted pale blue, the paint chipped and faded.

"That's it."

I put my hand on the knob. It was cold, impossibly cold, as if the door led not to a bedroom but to a freezer. I pushed.

The room was ordinary. A bed with a worn quilt. A dresser with a mirror. A window looking out toward the sea. And in the corner, exactly where Astrid had said, an old photograph in a silver frame. A woman in a gray dress.

I walked toward it, my feet making no sound on the bare floor. The woman in the photograph was young, maybe twenty, with dark hair and serious eyes. She stood in this very room, I could see the same window behind her, the same corner of the dresser and she wore a dress that buttoned up the front, with a collar that lay flat against her throat.

It was the same dress. The one in both photographs Astrid had shown me. And the woman, I knew her

face. I'd seen it before, in my grandmother's locket, in the stories my mother used to tell.

"Hilma," I said.

Behind me, Astrid gasped.

I turned. She was staring not at the photograph but at the bed. At the quilt, which had been smooth and tidy when we entered but was now rumpled, as if someone had been lying there. As if someone had just gotten up.

"She was here," Astrid whispered. "She was here last night. Standing in that corner. And now..."

The quilt moved.

Not much. Just a shift, the way fabric shifts when something underneath changes position. But we both saw it. We both took a step back.

"Get the chest," I said. "Bring it here."

"Elin..."

"Bring it here. Now."

While Astrid ran for the chest, I stood in the bedroom doorway and watched the quilt. Watched

the way the light fell across it, the way the shadows gathered in its folds. And I thought about my grandmother, who had died when I was twelve, who had held my face in her hands on her deathbed and said, "She'll come back, Elin. The sea doesn't keep what belongs to the land."

I had thought she was talking about herself. About dying, about going somewhere I couldn't follow. But now I wondered if she'd meant something else entirely.

Astrid returned, dragging the chest. We set it in the middle of the bedroom floor and knelt beside it, side by side, like children opening presents on Christmas morning.

The journal was on top. I lifted it carefully, the leather cracking under my fingers, and opened to the first page.

July 15, 1941

I am home. After six years, I am home. The crossing was terrible—the war makes everything terrible—but I am here. I stood on the jetty this morning and watched the sun rise over the old boathouse and I thought: I will never leave again. Whatever happens, whatever they say, I will never leave again.

They don't know I'm here. Not yet. I'll go to Gerda first—she'll know what to do. She'll know how to tell them. How to make them understand that I had to come back, that I couldn't stay in America, that the reasons I left don't matter anymore because I'm here now and I'm never leaving.

I'm so tired. I'll sleep first, then find her. Sleep, then—

The entry ended there. Not finished, just stopped. As if something had interrupted her.

I turned the page. Nothing. Blank pages, all the way to the end.

"She never went to Gerda," Astrid said quietly. "She never told anyone she was here."

"Then who took the photograph? The one on the rocks, with the harbour behind her?"

"Maybe she took it herself. Set up a camera on a timer, something like that. To prove she'd been here. To prove she'd come home."

I looked at the photograph on the dresser. At Hilma in her gray dress, standing in this very room, her face serious, her eyes looking directly at the camera. At whoever was behind it.

"She knew the person who took this," I said. "She trusted them. She let them into her room, into her secret. She told them she was here."

"And then..."

"And then something happened. Something that kept her from going home. Something that's been waiting ever since."

The quilt moved again. More this time, a definite shift, as if someone had turned over in their sleep. I stood up, my heart pounding, and walked toward the bed.

"Elin, don't..."

But I was already there, already reaching for the quilt, already pulling it back.

Beneath it, pressed into the mattress like a shadow, like a stain that wouldn't wash out, was the shape of a woman. Not a body, nothing solid, nothing you could touch. Just the impression of a body, the way a dent remains in a pillow long after someone has risen. And in that impression, faint as a whisper, the smell of lavender. The same lavender my grandmother used to keep in her linen closet, the same lavender Hilma would have known, would have grown in her

garden, would have carried with her to America and back again.

"She's still here," I breathed. "All this time. She's been here."

Astrid was crying. I don't know when she'd started, I only looked up and saw tears running down her face, saw her hands pressed against her mouth, saw her staring at the empty bed with an expression I couldn't name.

"I saw her," Astrid said. "Last night. Standing in the corner. She wasn't, she wasn't frightening. She was just... waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"For someone to find her. For someone to know."

I looked at the photograph again. At Hilma's serious face, her steady eyes. And I understood, suddenly, what I had to do.

"Help me," I said. "We're taking this chest to my house. We're taking the photograph, the journal, everything. And then we're going to find out what happened in 1941. We're going to find out why Hilma Nyström never went home."

"But how? The records..."

"The records are in people's memories. In old letters, old photographs, old stories. My mother is still alive. Your grandmother's cousins are still alive. There are people in this village who were here in 1941, who remember. We just have to ask."

"And if they don't want to tell?"

I looked at the bed. At the empty place where something waited. At the lavender smell that lingered in the air like a question.

"Then we'll ask anyway," I said. "Because some secrets have been buried long enough."

The cousins

My mother lives in the gray house at the north end of the village, the one with the roses that bloom so fiercely every June that people drive from as far away as Ystad to see them. She was ninety-one in May, still sharp, still fierce, still capable of reducing a grown man to silence with a single look.

I brought Astrid with me because I didn't trust myself to tell the story right. Because my mother would need to see her, to see the Pettersson in her face, to understand that this wasn't just my curiosity but something larger, something that had been waiting for both of us.

We found her in the kitchen, rolling out pastry for a pie. She didn't stop when we came in, just kept working, her hands moving with the practiced economy of someone who has done the same thing ten thousand times.

"Mother," I said. "This is Astrid Pettersson. She's Gerda's cousin's granddaughter. From Lund."

My mother's hands paused, just for a moment, then continued. "Sit down. The pie will be in the oven soon, and then we can talk."

We sat. We waited. The clock ticked. The kettle whistled, and my mother made tea, setting cups in front of us with the same precision she brought to everything. Only when the pie was safely in the oven did she sit down across from us, her eyes moving from Astrid's face to mine and back again.

"So," she said. "You've found something."

It wasn't a question. I pulled out the photograph, the one of Hilma on the rocks, and laid it on the table between us.

My mother looked at it for a long time. Longer than the photograph warranted, longer than someone would look at a picture they'd never seen before. And when she spoke, her voice was different. Softer. Younger.

"I knew her," she said. "I was eight years old in 1941, and I knew her."

"You knew Hilma?" I couldn't keep the shock from my voice. "But she disappeared before you were born. She left in 1935..."

"She came back." My mother's eyes met mine, and in them I saw something I'd never seen before: fear. Real fear, the kind that doesn't fade with age. "She came back in the summer of 1941, and I saw her. No one believed me. My mother said I dreamed it, said I'd heard too many stories, said Hilma was in America and couldn't possibly be standing on the jetty in the dawn light. But I saw her."

"Where? When?"

"At the harbour. I'd woken early, I always woke early in summer, the light came so fast and I'd gone down to the water. And there she was. Standing on the jetty with a suitcase at her feet, just watching the sun come up. She turned when she heard me, and she smiled, and she said, 'You're Elsa's girl, aren't you? You look just like her.' And then she put her finger to her lips, like it was a secret, and walked away toward the Pettersson place."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"I told my mother. She told me to hush, told me I'd

been dreaming, told me never to speak of it again. And I didn't. For eighty years, I didn't."

Astrid leaned forward. "What happened to her, Fru Nyström? What happened after that morning?"

My mother shook her head. "I don't know. I never saw her again. But I heard things. Whispers. The kind of whispers that travel between houses when the windows are open and the wind is right. About a baby. About a man who wasn't her husband. About a family who couldn't bear the shame."

"A baby?" I stared at her. "Hilma had a baby?"

"She was pregnant when she left for America. That's why she left. The father was married, you see. Married to someone in this village. She couldn't stay, couldn't face the gossip, couldn't bear to watch him choose his wife and children over her every single day. So she went to America, and she had the baby there, and she gave it away. At least, that's what people said. That's what they always said."

"Then why did she come back?"

My mother looked at me, and in her old eyes I saw a sorrow so deep it had no bottom. "Because she changed her mind. Because she couldn't live without

her child. Because she came back to find it, to claim it, to take it home. And someone..." She stopped. Swallowed. "Someone couldn't let that happen."

"The father," Astrid said. "The married man. Who was he?"

My mother didn't answer. She just looked at me, and in her look was everything: the weight of eighty years of silence, the cost of keeping secrets, the terrible price of love.

"Mother," I said. "Who was he?"

"Your grandfather," she whispered. "Hilma's baby was your father. Your father, Elin. Born in America in 1936, adopted by my sister and her husband when they couldn't have children of their own. Brought home to Sweden in 1937. Raised in this village, two kilometers from the woman who gave birth to him, by people who loved him as their own. And Hilma... Hilma came back to find him, came back to claim him, came back to tear apart the family that had taken him in. So they stopped her. The family. The people who loved him. They stopped her, and they buried the truth, and they told themselves it was for the best."

The room was very quiet. The pie baked in the oven, filling the kitchen with the smell of apples and cinnamon. The clock ticked. The sea, somewhere beyond the window, went on with its endless rhythm.

"They killed her," I said. It wasn't a question.

"I don't know. I never knew. But she never left this village after that morning. And Gerda, Gerda lived in that house for forty years, and she never spoke of it, never spoke of anything, just waited and watched and kept the secret because keeping it was the only way to survive."

"Gerda knew."

"Gerda was the one who met her at the harbour. Gerda was the one she trusted. Gerda was the one who brought her to the house and then..." My mother shook her head. "I don't know what happened next. No one knows. But Gerda wore that dress for the rest of her life. The gray dress, the one Hilma had worn in the photograph. She wore it every day, under her clothes, next to her skin. As if she was trying to keep Hilma close. As if she was trying to make up for something."

I thought of the quilt moving on the bed. The

lavender smell. The woman in the corner, watching, waiting.

"She's still there," I said. "Hilma. In that house. Waiting."

My mother reached across the table and took my hand. Her skin was paper-thin, her bones like bird bones, but her grip was strong.

"Then you must go back," she said. "You must tell her that her son was loved. That he had a good life. That he never knew, and that was a mercy. You must tell her that it's time to rest now. Time to stop waiting."

"How do I tell a ghost anything?"

My mother smiled, and in her smile I saw the girl she'd been, the girl who'd seen her aunt on a jetty at dawn and kept the secret for eighty years.

"The same way you tell anyone," she said. "You open your heart. And you speak the truth."

The return

We went back that night, Astrid and I. Not because we were brave—we weren't—but because waiting would only make it harder. Because some things can't be put off until morning.

The old Pettersson house was dark when we arrived, darker than the night around it, as if it swallowed light instead of reflecting it. But when we pushed open the door, we found the kitchen lit by a single candle, burning on the table where no candle had been.

"Hilma," I said. "I know you're here. I know you've been waiting. I've come to tell you what happened. What no one ever told you."

The air shifted. Grew colder. And in the doorway to the bedroom, a figure appeared. Not solid, not quite, but there ...a woman in a gray dress, her dark

hair escaping from under a scarf, her eyes fixed on my face.

I walked toward her. Astrid stayed behind, and I don't blame her, I could feel the cold radiating from that figure, could feel the weight of eighty years of waiting pressing down on me like water. But I kept walking until I stood before her, close enough to touch, though I knew my hand would pass through empty air.

"Your son," I said. "His name was Sven. He was raised by my grandmother's sister and her husband, and they loved him. They loved him the way you would have loved him, if you'd been able to keep him. He grew up strong and kind. He married a girl from the next village. He had three children, my father was the youngest. He died in 1995, surrounded by family, at peace with the world."

The figure didn't move. But something shifted in her face. Something that might have been grief, or relief, or both.

"He never knew," I continued. "He never knew you were his mother. He never knew you came back. And maybe that was wrong, maybe he should have known, but it wasn't done out of cruelty. It was done

out of love. The people who raised him loved him. The people who..." I stopped. Swallowed. "The people who stopped you from finding him loved him too much to let him go. They made a terrible choice. They took your life. And they carried that guilt for the rest of their days."

The candle flickered. The figure wavered, like heat rising from a road. And in the silence, I heard something. Not words, exactly. More like the memory of words, the echo of a voice long silenced.

My baby. My boy. He was real.

"Yes," I said. "He was real. And he had a good life. A life you gave him, by bringing him into the world, even if you couldn't raise him. That matters. That will always matter."

The figure began to fade. Not dramatically, not like smoke dissolving, just slowly, gently, like a photograph losing its exposure. But before she disappeared entirely, she looked at me, and in her eyes I saw something I hadn't expected.

Gratitude.

And then she was gone, and the candle went out, and Astrid and I stood in the darkness of that old

house with our hearts pounding and our breath coming fast and the lavender smell slowly fading from the air.

"She's at peace," I said. I don't know how I knew, but I did. "She's finally at peace."

We walked home in silence. The stars were out, the sea was quiet, and somewhere in the distance, an owl called to its mate. By the time we reached my kitchen, the eastern sky was beginning to lighten, and the gulls were stirring on the rocks.

"Will you stay?" I asked Astrid, as I put the kettle on. "In the village, I mean. Now that it's over?"

She thought about it. "I don't know. I came here for answers, and I found them. But I also found..." She stopped, searching for the right word. "A connection. To a place I'd never been, to people I'd never met. To a story that turned out to be my story too."

"Your story?"

"Hilma's baby, Sven, he was my grandmother's cousin. That makes us family, you and me. Distant family, but family all the same."

I looked at her, this woman who had arrived on the Wednesday afternoon bus, who had seen a ghost in a bedroom, who had helped me uncover secrets buried for eighty years and I felt something shift in my chest. Something that might have been hope.

"Then you should stay," I said. "At least for a while. There's room at the old Pettersson place, and I could use help with the garden, and..." I shrugged, embarrassed. "It would be nice to have family around. Even distant family."

Astrid smiled. It was the first real smile I'd seen from her, and it changed her face entirely, made her look younger, lighter.

"I'd like that," she said. "I'd like that very much."

The Sea Chest

August 2024

The sea chest sits in my living room now, on a low table where anyone can see it. I've read all the letters, studied all the photographs, learned the story of Hilma Nyström's life in America, the factory work, the loneliness, the baby born in a strange city and given away to strangers who turned out to be cousins after all. It's all there, in her careful handwriting, in the small details she thought worth recording.

What isn't there is what happened after she came home. That part we had to discover for ourselves.

Astrid stayed. She's living in the old Pettersson house, fixing it up, planting a garden, teaching part-time at the university in Lund and commuting back on weekends. She says the house feels different now.

Lighter. As if something that was pressing down on it has finally lifted.

My mother died in July, peacefully, in her sleep. I found her with a photograph in her hand, the one of Hilma on the jetty and a smile on her face. She'd kept the secret for eighty years, and in the end, I think she was grateful to let it go.

I think about Hilma sometimes, when I'm walking on the rocks at dawn or watching the sun set over the harbour. I think about the choices she made, the losses she endured, the love that brought her home and the love that kept her here long after her body was gone. And I think about what my grandmother used to say, the words I didn't understand until now:

The sea doesn't keep what belongs to the land.

Hilma belonged to this place. To this village, this coast, this stretch of rocks and water and sky. She came home to it, and in the end, it held her, not as a prisoner, but as part of itself. Part of the story that goes on being told, long after the tellers are gone.

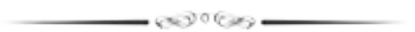
The sea chest is open on my table. Inside, the photographs wait for someone to look at them, to wonder about the faces they hold. Someday, maybe,

that someone will be my granddaughter, or hers, and they'll ask the same questions I asked, and they'll find their own answers, and the story will go on.

That's what stories do. They go on. They find new tellers, new listeners, new hearts to break and heal. And in that way, the people in them never really die.

They just wait. Like Hilma waited. Like we all wait, in the end, for someone to come along and ask the right questions, and listen to the answers, and carry the story forward into whatever comes next.

The End



The Sea Chest

Kristina Claesson

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi magazine
Design: Thanos

An Ovi Magazine Books Publication
©2026 Ovi Project Publication - All material is copyright of the Ovi magazine & the writer

Ovi books are available in Ovi magazine pages and they are for free.
If somebody tries to sell you an Ovi book please contact us immediately.

For details, contact: submissions@ovimagazine.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, printed or digital,
altered or selectively extracted by any means
(electronic, mechanical, print, photocopying, recording or otherwise)
without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

THE SEA CHEST

The box arrived on a Tuesday, in the slack hour between the morning catch and the tourists who would never come to Glivarp.

Kristina Claesson, a retired health worker from a sleepy South Swedish town, who dedicates her newfound freedom to chronicling the people and the utterly absurd events that unfold in her otherwise idyllic community in ...English of all choices!

KRISTINA CLAESSON